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A DISCOURSE
READ AT A MEETING
OF THE
ASIATIC SOCIETY
OF
GREAT BRITAIN AND IRELAND,
ON THE 15th OF MARCH, 1823,
BY
H. T. COLEBROOKE, Esq.

CALLED by the indulgence of this meeting to a chair, which I could have wished to have seen more worthily filled, upon so interesting an occasion, as the first general meeting of a Society, instituted for the important purpose of *the advancement of knowledge in relation to Asia*, I shall, with your permission, detain you a little from the special business of the day, while I draw your more particular attention to the objects of the Institution, for the furtherance of which we are now assembled.

To those countries of Asia, in which civilization may be justly considered to have had its origin, or to have attained its earliest growth, the rest of the civilized world owes a large debt of gratitude, which it cannot but be solicitous to repay: and England, as most advanced in refinement, is, for that very cause, the most

beholden; and, by acquisition of dominion in the East, is bound by a yet closer tie. As Englishmen, we participate in the earnest wish, that this duty may be fulfilled, and that obligation required; and we share in the anxious desire of contributing to such a happy result, by promoting an interchange of benefits, and returning in an improved state that which was received in a ruder form.

But improvement, to be efficient, must be adapted to the actual condition of things: and hence a necessity for exact information of all that is there known, which belongs to science; and all that is there practised, which appertains to arts.

Be it then our part to investigate the sciences of Asia; and inquire into the arts of the East; with the hope of facilitating ameliorations, of which they may be found susceptible.

In progress of such researches, it is not perhaps too much to expect, that something may yet be gleaned for the advancement of knowledge, and improvement of arts, at home. In many recent instances, inventive faculties have been tasked to devise anew, what might have been as readily copied from an Oriental type; or unacknowledged imitation has reproduced in Europe, with an air of novelty, what had been for ages familiar in the East. Nor is that source to be considered as already exhausted. In beauty of fabric, in simplicity of process, there possibly yet remains something to be learnt from China, from Japan, from India; which the refinement of Europe need not disdain.

The characteristic of the arts in Asia is simplicity. With rude implements, and by coarse means, arduous tasks have been achieved, and the most finished results have been obtained; which, for a long period, were scarcely equalled, and have, but recently, been surpassed, by polished artifice and refined skill in Europe. Were it a question of mere curiosity, it might yet be worth the inquiry, what were the rude means by which such things have been accomplished? The question, however, is not a merely idle one. It may be investigated with confidence, that an useful answer will be derived. If it do not point to the way of perfecting

European skill, it assuredly will to that of augmenting Asiatic attainments.

The course of inquiry into the arts, as into the sciences, of Asia, cannot fail of leading to much which is curious, and instructive. The inquiry extends over regions, the most anciently and the most numerously peopled on the globe. The range of research is as wide, as those regions are vast; and as various, as the people who inhabit them are diversified. It embraces their ancient and modern history; their civil polity; their long-enduring institutions; their manners, and their customs; their languages, and their literature; their sciences, speculative and practical: in short, the progress of knowledge among them; the pitch which it has attained; and last, but most important, the means of its extension.

In speaking of the history of Asiatic nations (and it is in Asia, that recorded and authentic history of mankind commences), I do not refer merely to the succession of political struggles, national conflicts, and warlike achievements; but rather to less conspicuous, yet more important, occurrences, which directly concern the structure of society; the civil institutions of nations; their internal, more than their external, relations: and the yet less prominent, but more momentous, events, which affect society universally, and advance it in the scale of civilized life.

It is the history of the human mind, which is most diligently to be investigated: the discoveries of the wise; the inventions of the ingenious; and the contrivances of the skilful.

Nothing, which has much engaged the thoughts of man, is foreign to our inquiry, within the local limits, which we have prescribed to it. We do not exclude from our research the political transactions of Asiatic states, nor the lucubrations of Asiatic philosophers. The first are necessarily connected, in no small degree, with the history of the progress of society; the latter have great influence on the literary, the speculative, and the practical, avocations of men.

Nor is the ascertainment of any fact to be considered destitute of use. The aberrations of the human mind are a part of its history. It is neither uninteresting, nor useless, to ascertain what it is that ingenious men have done, and contemplative minds have thought, in former times; even where they have erred: especially, where their error has been graced by elegance, or redeemed by tasteful fancy.

Mythology then, however futile, must, for those reasons, be noticed. It influences the manners, it pervades the literature, of nations which have admitted it.

Philosophy of ancient times must be studied; though it be the edifice of large inference, raised on the scanty ground of assumed premises. Such as it is, most assiduously has it been cultivated by Oriental nations, from the further India to Asiatic Greece. The more it is investigated, the more intimate will the relation be found between the philosophy of Greece, and that of India. Whichever is the type, or the copy, whichever has borrowed, or has lent, certain it is, that the one will serve to elucidate the other. The philosophy of India may be employed for a commentary on that of Greece; and conversely Grecian philosophy will help to explain Indian. That of Arabia too, avowedly copied from the Grecian model, has preserved much which else might have been lost. A part has been restored through the medium of translation; and more may yet be retrieved from Arabic stores.

The ancient language of India, the polished Sanscrit, not unallied to Greek and various other languages of Europe, may yet contribute something to their elucidation; and still more to the not unimportant subject of general grammar.

Though attic taste be wanting in the literary performances of Asia, they are not, on that sole ground, to be utterly neglected. Much that is interesting, may yet be elicited from Arabic and Sanscrit lore, from Arabian and Indian antiquities.

Connected as those highly polished and refined languages are with other tongues, they deserve to be studied for the sake of the

particular dialects and idioms, to which they bear relation ; for their own sake, that is, for the literature which appertains to them ; and for the analysis of language in general, which has been unsuccessfully attempted on too narrow ground, but may be prosecuted, with effect, upon wider induction.

The same is to be said of Chinese literature and language. This field of research, which is now open to us, may be cultivated with confident reliance on a successful result ; making us better acquainted with a singular people, whose manners, institutions, opinions, arts and productions, differ most widely from those of the West ; and through them, perhaps, with other tribes of Tartaric race, still more singular, and still less known.

Wide as is the geographical extent of the region, to which primarily our attention is directed, and from which our association has taken its designation, the range of our research is not confined to those geographical limits. Western Asia has, in all times, maintained intimate relation with contiguous, and not unfrequently, with distant, countries : and that connexion will justify, and often render necessary, excursive disquisition beyond its bounds. We may lay claim to many Grecian topics, as bearing relation to Asiatic Greece ; to numerous topics of yet higher interest, connected with Syria, with Chaldæa, with Palestine. Arabian literature will conduct us still further. Wherever it has followed the footsteps of Moslem conquest, inquiry will pursue its trace. Attending the Arabs in Egypt, the Moors in Africa ; accompanying these into Spain, and cultivated there with assiduity, it must be investigated without exclusion of countries, into which it made its way.

Neither are our researches limited to the old continent, nor to the history and pursuits of antient times. Modern enterprise has added to the known world a second Asiatic continent ; which British colonies have annexed to the British domain. The situation of Austral Asia connects it with the Indian Archipelago. Its occupation by English colonies brings it in relation with British India.

Of that new country, where every thing is strange, much is yet to be learnt. Its singular physical geography, its peculiar productions, the phænomena of its climate, present numerous subjects of inquiry : and various difficulties are to be overcome, in the solution of the problem of adapting the arts of Europe to the novel situation of that distant territory. The ASIATIC SOCIETY of Great Britain will contribute its aid towards the accomplishment of those important objects.

Remote as are the regions to which our attention is turned, no country enjoys greater advantages than Great Britain, for conducting inquiries respecting them. Possessing a great Asiatic empire, its influence extends far beyond its direct and local authority. Both within its territorial limits and without them, the public functionaries have occasion for acquiring varied information, and correct knowledge of the people, and of the country. Political transactions, operations of war, relations of commerce, the pursuits of business, the enterprise of curiosity, the desire of scientific acquirements, carry British subjects to the most distant and the most secluded spots. Their duties, their professions, lead them abroad : and they avail themselves of opportunity, thus afforded, for acquisition of accurate acquaintance with matters, presented to their notice. One requisite is there wanting, as long since remarked by the venerable founder of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, it is leisure : but that is enjoyed, on their return to their native country. Here may be arranged the treasured knowledge, which they bring with them ; the written or the remembered information, which they have gathered. Here are preserved in public and private repositories, manuscript books, collected in the East ; exempt from the prompt decay, which would there have overtaken them. Here, too, are preserved, in the archives of families, the manuscript observations of individuals, whose diffidence has prevented them from giving to the public the fruits of their labours, in a detached form.

An Association, established in Great Britain, with views analogous to those, for which the parent Society of Bengal was instituted, and which happily are adopted by Societies, which have arisen at other British stations in Asia, at Bombay, at Madras, at Bencoolen, will furnish inducement to those, who, during their sojourn abroad, have contributed their efforts for the promotion of knowledge, to continue their exertions after their return. It will serve to assemble scattered materials, which are now liable to be lost to the public, for want of a vehicle of publication. It will lead to a more diligent examination of the treasures of Oriental literature, preserved in public and private libraries. In cordial co-operation with the existing Societies in India, it will assist their labours, and will be assisted by them. It will tend to an object, first in importance: the increase of knowledge in Asia, by diffusion of European science. And whence can this be so effectually done, as from Great Britain?

For such purposes we are associated; and to such ends our efforts are directed. To further these objects, we are now assembled: and the measures, which will be proposed to you, Gentlemen, are designed for the commencement of a course, which, I confidently trust, may, in its progress, be eminently successful, and largely contribute to the augmented enjoyments of the innumerable people, subject to British sway abroad; and (with humility and deference be it spoken, yet not without aspiration after public usefulness,) conspicuously tend to British prosperity, as connected with Asia.